

Reviews

Elizabeth Ann Warner (E. E. Uorner). Vladimir Iakovlevich Propp i russkaia fol'kloristika. Filologicheskii fakul'tet Sankt-Peterburgskogo gos. universiteta: SPb, 2005. 143 pp. 165 rubles (paper). ISBN 5-8465-0092-7.

Elizabeth Warner's new book, Vladimir Iakovlevich Propp i russkaia fol'kloristika (Vladimir Iakovlevich Propp and Russian Folkloristics) is an important work that no specialist interested in Russian folklore or ethnography can afford to ignore. In this compact study of Propp (1895-1970), arguably the most influential Russian folklorist of the twentieth century, Warner demonstrates the influences on his thinking, both in the formative years as a student and young lecturer, of the great Russian philologists of pre-Revolutionary Russia, and of his colleagues in the early years of the Soviet state.

Warner's study proves the essential unity of Propp's four most important books and many of his other works as well. The first two chapters deal with Morphology of the Folktale (*Morfologiia skazki*). Included under this rubric are sections dealing with Propp's biography, although this is a topic to which she frequently returns as the book progresses. Mainly though, her interest is in the reception of Morphology in the West, and here she provides some telling blows to the translations of the two English editions that led Western scholars so far astray in their understanding of Propp's work, and the fascinating question of whether Propp was a formalist in the 1920s. A section is devoted to the famous dispute between Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss. In it Warner establishes that much of the problem was directly related to the fact that Levi-Strauss had no access to Propp's Russian text and therefore followed the mistranslations of the American editions. On the other hand, she points out that Propp did not have a clear understanding of the French scholar's objections either.

By and large, Propp's Morphology disappeared from the Russian public's view in the long period from circa 1930 until not long before the second edition appeared in 1969, but as Warner establishes, the book never disappeared from the consciousness of Russian folklorists. It was also bound to attract the attention of Soviet critics in their campaign against Formalism, but Propp never altered his views, insisting that his was a preliminary study to establish the nature of the wondertale and not the final product of his scholarship on that topic.

It is a great pity that in the Western world Propp's Morfologiia skazki is the only one of his books to be widely known. This is especially true of his second work, The Historical Roots of the Wondertale (*Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki*), which appeared in 1946. Providing the flesh to the skeleton of Morphology, Historical Roots soon got Propp into hot water in the dangerous years immediately following World War II. Warner carefully follows the vicissitudes of Propp and his work, wondering how he managed to escape the harsh treatment meted out to his colleagues in Leningrad University. The thesis of Historical Roots is that the wondertale's origins are to be sought in ancient myth and ritual. However, given the paucity of direct evidence for either of these in Russian tradition, Propp makes wide use of evidence from other traditions. In Warner's opinion the work laid the foundation for a new methodological approach to folklore as a whole. She terms it "interethnic, comparative, and historical," what would later be called the "historical-typological method." Certainly he was publicly denounced for this and accused of being a Marxist in the West, while in the Soviet Union he was called a "pseudo-Marxist." One question I found myself asking is whether Warner thinks Propp was in fact a Marxist. There seems to be evidence on both sides of an answer to this point and it would have been interesting had she put the question to Propp's former colleagues or students.

One of the fascinating things about this book is the use Professor Warner makes of her extensive contacts among Russian folklorists to answer many similar questions. An example: was Propp ever imprisoned during the Leningrad purges? Her answer based on the direct knowledge of his colleagues and friends is that it is most unlikely.

In the third of his great studies, The Russian Heroic Epic (*Russkii geroicheskii epos*), published in 1955, Propp tackled the problem of the historical basis of the Russian *byliny* (folk epics). As Warner points out, his theory that the various *byliny* were created at various stages in Russian history but that they did not necessarily reflect particular historical events set him at odds with some of the most influential Soviet historians including B. A. Rybakov and D. S. Likhachev. All this was part of a larger discussion about the historical basis of folklore, touching on such perennial questions as the genesis of the various genres, especially the *byliny*. The question of the aristocratic origins of these poetic songs, mostly collected from peasants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not just an academic one: the Communist party weighed in with its own arguments against the Historical school and

Propp found himself once more on the defensive. As a result of the campaigns against N. Ia. Marr and his followers, instigated by Stalin, and the continuing battle against structuralism, Propp saw his Heroic Epic emasculated by the authorities and turned into a work more or less acceptable to doctrinaire Marxists. In fact, however, the question of the genesis and historicity of the epic songs remains a thorny one fifty years on.

Propp's fourth study, Russian Agrarian Celebrations (*Russkie agrarnye prazdniki*), published in 1963, represents, according to Warner, the first attempt of a Russian scholar to examine elements which various rural celebrations or festivals have in common rather than looking at the particular event as if it were unconnected to others. As Warner herself is not only a folklorist but also an ethnographer, her comments are particularly noteworthy. It is here that she establishes how Propp sought throughout all his works to show how folkloric texts are directly tied to the everyday life of the people who created and/or transmitted them, whether wondertales, historical *byliny*, or the rituals connected to life's celebrations. The studies his students and followers have published over the years prove the correctness of his conception.

Professor Warner finds fault with Propp's various works on many accounts, and she argues her objections with fairness and erudition. That is one of the pleasures of reading this book. Another is the way she shows his evolution from the folklorist of Morphology to ethnographer who uses structural methods combined with the historical data and ethnographic evidence to create a fundamentally new approach to the study of folklore taken as a whole. In the end she agrees with Kirill Vasil'evich Chistov's clever characterization of Propp as "a cat who went his own way." A twelve-page bibliography concludes this fascinating book that deserves a wide readership.

Jack V. Haney
Seattle